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UCT student overcomes multiple odds to graduate – with a little help from the Student in Distress Fund

Graduations are celebrations, but few realise the struggles that many students face in getting across the finish line. One such student is Nkululeko Dlamini, who overcame multiple difficulties to complete his studies engineering studies at the University of Cape Town.

When the third-year student was found sleeping in an engineering lab – thin, hungry and penniless with his meagre belongings crammed into a small backpack – no one could guess how things might turn out for him.

However, the Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment 'distress funds' can make all the difference to students like Dlamini.

As a child, Dlamini attended a poorly resourced school, east of Johannesburg, where he was part of a feeding scheme. When he came to UCT, he struggled with English and the death of his mother which was a huge setback. Without financial resources, he was sure he would never graduate. However, the EBE's Student in Distress Fund and an academic mentor, Ernesto Ismail, enabled him to put his life back together and complete his studies.

Sometimes it's a fee deficit as small as R6 000 that stands between a student being able to graduate and stalling at the finish line.

Dlamini now works for the Central Energy Fund (CEF) group on a clean energy project. Dlamini thanked the faculty for everything and for playing big role in his life.

"Today I am the person I am because the Faculty believed in me. This is the beginning of my career and I will grab the opportunity with both hands and ensure that I will continue developing myself to become one of the greatest leaders in the country," says Dlamini.

The Student in Distress Fund plays an important role in the engineering faculty.

Professor Alison Lewis, dean of EBE said: "It might not be a huge amount of money, but it helps us deal with cases that might fall through the cracks and we are able to intervene in a flexible way."

Last year the fund assisted 76 engineering students with their individual needs, at a cost of R383 000. Some aid was provided as a once-off, while other funding assisted students over a longer period, says faculty marketing and communications manager, Mary Hilton, who administers the programme.

Funds were used for fee deficits, laptops, stationery, books, transport, rent and vouchers for toiletries, medicine and food.

Hilton added: "This year we bought seven laptops for students who were living off campus and found it difficult to access information during the [student] protests. Several Zimbabwean students were unable to get money out of Zimbabwe, and we assisted with rent and food. All the students who have been assisted are eager to give back to the fund once they are on their feet and earning money."

The faculty relies on 21 regular benefactors in alumni, friends and staff for the funding. They also received a donation from industry and R100 000 from the Vice-Chancellor's Challenge Fund.

The Student in Distress Fund was launched in 2015 with a fundraising campaign, supported by the faculty's student council, which raised R6 600 from fellow students. Staff and alumni also assisted and the fund could help its first six students.

Hilton provides a backdrop: "With the poor economic climate, the changes in the criteria for NSFAS funding and family circumstances that change, there are a number of EBE students who find themselves with no money for food, accommodation, or just basic necessities."

Two other EBE students who were assisted through the faculty's fund will graduate this year. The graduation ceremonies will take place between 3 and 10 April 2018.

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